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SUBJECT: GEN ABIZAID'S 3/29 MEETING WITH SULTAN QABOOS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.  
Reason: 1.4 (b, d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) In a March 29 visit by USCENTCOM CDR Gen Abizaid, Sultan Qaboos credited Saudi Arabia for tactical successes against terrorism but worried whether the Al Saud yet have a longer term strategy. He sees Iraq still at a crossroads, expressing concern over the country's territorial integrity, its weak sense of national identity, and the troubling symbolism of the Saddam-era flag. He is impatient for an Iraqi government to form and for the adoption of a constitution that will give lasting assurance to minorities and secularists. Noting that Iranian policies will be hard to divine prior to the outcome of this year's presidential election, the Sultan is gravely concerned that Tehran not "do anything stupid" with respect to its nuclear programs. He sees no recourse but for the USG to engage in direct dialogue with Iran, and cautioned Washington to keep in mind that the Islamic Republic is merely a thin disguise for what remains imperial-minded Persia. He shared his conversations with a "deeply disappointed" President Khatami. Sultan Qaboos expressed optimism that the appeal for extremist ideologies appears to be somewhat on the decline in the region, which is contributing to a marked increase in tourism and direct foreign investment. He is buoyant on the near-term prospects for a U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement. The Sultan listed freedom of expression and sharing power with the public as vital antidotes to extremism. End summary.

2. (SBU) On March 29, USCENTCOM CDR General Abizaid paid a call on Sultan Qaboos at the royal camp in Manah. The Sultan was joined in the 90-minute meeting by Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces, LTG Ahmed al-Nabhani. General Abizaid was accompanied by the Ambassador and senior CENTCOM and Embassy staff members. The party was flown to the royal camp at Saih al-Barakat, about 40 minutes' flight-time from Muscat, aboard two of the Sultan's helicopters.

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Iraq at a Crossroads  
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3. (C) The Sultan entered the meeting, he noted, having just watched the news and seeing that the Iraqi parliament had yet to agree on a new government. He praised the Iraqi people for showing great courage by coming out to vote, but observed that now was the time for the politicians to deliver on promises and put past differences behind them. Should the political divisions persist, he circumspectly predicted that Iraq "will not be a happy place." Noting the need to draft and approve a constitution and hold new elections by the end of the year, he lamented the lack of cohesion among Iraqi political forces. Getting things right now, he pointed out, could bring enduring peace and stability to that country.

4. (C) The Sultan was keen to discuss Iraq's flag, soliciting GEN Abizaid's views on the matter. GEN Abizaid noted the controversy sparked by an earlier effort to change the Iraqi flag, and therefore predicted it was likely to endure in its existing state. Sultan Qaboos argued strongly against the current Iraqi flag. He believes the colors represent bankrupt Baathist ideology, while "Allah Akbar" was a crass, cynical add-on by a deposed dictator (Saddam Hussein). Symbolism, the Sultan argued, matters, which is why he completely scrapped Oman's 1970's-era flag. But he acknowledged that the matter, ultimately, is for the Iraqi people to decide.

5. (C) Asked for his general assessment, the Omani monarch said most people remain conflicted as to the degree of progress being made in Iraq. He identified Iraq's long-term territorial integrity as remaining a top concern for the region, even if fears of disintegration have reduced of late. While Kurds, Shia and Arab Sunnis should all see themselves as Iraqis first and foremost, many still do not. He also noted concerns that Shia parties may be espousing a moderate line now on the role of religion in the Iraqi state, but that

some fear they could take a more radical approach once firmly in power. "One can't dismiss the possibility," he worried.

16. (C) The new Iraqi constitution, he argued, should be firm and rigid to preclude future manipulation and to give Iraq's minority groups reassurance about their status. Ordinary people, he noted, do not want religious or ethnic strife, but rather jobs and personal security. If the new constitution is too open to interpretation, he warned that the U.S. may find after its forces have left that elements will "play" with the situation and bring to power a dictatorship similar to the one the U.S. fought so hard to remove. Even a "middle ground" approach, he said, could conceal time bombs. Likewise, while it is meritorious of the USG to consult with Iraq's neighbors, the Sultan warned that many of those states have ulterior motives and selfish interests in mind. While Oman, given its distance, is "neutral," the Sultan opined that the same is not true of many other states. Similarly, the Sultan perceives a moderating approach by the regional media, but says they remain selective in what they report and can resume "spinning" stories in the future.

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Saudi Arabia: Abdullah Trying, But...  
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17. (C) Viewing Saudi Arabia, the Sultan appraised the recent period of relative calm there as evidence that the security situation appears to be stabilizing. He repeatedly gave credit to Crown Prince Abdullah for trying his best and being a strong leader. He remains concerned, however, that the Saudi royal family is focusing too much on today's problems and not enough on the next generation. Noting the frank conversations he used to enjoy with King Fahd, the Sultan questioned whether Abdullah enjoyed full backing and solidarity. Concentrating too much on security, Abdullah seems to wax and wane between inviting public dialogue and turning against it. The Kingdom likewise seems to get wrapped up on trivial matters such as whether women should have the right to drive because such issues become existential to the religious hard-liners. The Saudi royal family, the Sultan feels, needs to deal with the fanatics in a comprehensive, decisive way.

18. (C) Revealing much about his own views on religion, the Sultan observed that religion combines many features: fundamental pillars of belief, rules of interpersonal behavior, and a kind of social contract, among others. Islam, he said, strictly proscribes only a very narrow band of activities, such as drinking blood and eating pork; everything else is simply cultural interpretation. He finds it ridiculous that some people claim women must wear a hijab as an article of faith, whereas the Quran makes no such requirement. Murdering people in the name of the faith is likewise an abomination. Noting how effective Christian missionaries were in presenting a positive image of their religion by coming to places like Oman as doctors and teachers, he questioned what image of Islam is presented by suicide bombers. Illustrating the impossibility of imposing faith, the Sultan recounted how his parents would force him to pray at the appointed morning and evening prayer times. Having every intention to pray at the time of his choosing, Qaboos resented being told exactly when to do so. So he would go through the motions when forced, but did not actually pray. It is human nature, he noted, to rebel against tight authority.

19. (C) The Sultan also worried that the new Saudi generation is more conservative than the elder set. The young, he surmised, wish to control their futures with an iron grip, which is doomed to fail. Qaboos' own formula for successful rule is to share as much power with the public as possible. Rather than weakening the ruler's hand, doing this, he said, actually increases the head of state's power by harnessing strong popular support.

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Iran  
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10. (C) Sultan Qaboos expressed his strong personal hope that the USG and Iran would some day sit down together and truly talk. Speaking bluntly, he sees that as the only way forward, though admitted that he was not certain how Iran would react to an invitation to dialogue. The Sultan was reserving judgment on that question pending the outcome of the Iranian elections, at which point the picture should become more clear. Naming Rafsanjani, Velayati, and others as possible successors to President Khatami, Qaboos said the only thing certain was that Ayatollah Khamenei will have an important influence. The Sultan revealed that Khatami confided to him during his October 2004 state visit that he was seriously considering moving to an Arab Gulf state upon leaving office to write his memoirs, improve his Arabic, and lead a more settled life. Qaboos observed that "some say" Khamenei has been particularly harsh in his treatment of Khatami out of pique that the international community pays

the Ayatollah so little heed.

11. (C) Khatemi had told the Sultan that he was a "very disappointed man." The Iranian president said he had tried his best to bring about reform while in office, particularly after his landslide electoral victory. But at a critical juncture in his term (NFI), he did not get the support he needed from the U.S. and West. The conservatives detected that, and from that point on Khatemi's political position eroded quickly.

12. (C) While there are "some good people" among Iran's politicians, the Sultan said there were also many conservatives. He repeatedly expressed his hope that those conservatives would "not be stupid," that they will understand the international community's red lines, and that, at a minimum, they will realize that "now is not the time" to satisfy their nuclear ambitions. Offering the unique perspective of an ancient state that has always bordered Iran, the Sultan cautioned the U.S. not to be fooled by the superficial patina of the "Islamic Republic of Iran." "You are dealing with Persia, not the 'Islamic Republic.'"

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Extremism Down, Economy Up  
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13. (SBU) The Sultan was buoyed by recent much-needed rains in the Sultanate, and by considerable activity in developing Oman's tourism and industrial infrastructure. Egyptian and Emirati investors, including Dubai Crown Prince Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum (whom the Sultan termed a "fearless" investor), were set to launch several new resort complexes along Oman's undeveloped coastline, and the long-awaited Salalah Free Zone project was formally launched that very morning in Southern Oman. The Sultan specifically voiced his expectation that the Free Trade Agreement currently being negotiated with the USG will be signed soon, and anticipated the economic doors of opportunity that it will open for Oman.

14. (SBU) The Sultan attributed the up-tick in tourism and investment throughout the region to the Middle East being "at peace with itself" more than in recent years. Higher oil prices help, he quipped, but argued that the price per barrel is illusive when not placed in context. He noted that Oman reaps only a fraction of the USD 44 per barrel for oil given the high production costs and the significantly reduced purchasing power of the dollar. The key to money is not how much you have, he advised, but rather how well you manage it. He rejects those who always look to the past as some golden era, and likewise cautioned against believing the economists "who are always trying to convince you that things are worse off than they are." Every opportunity comes with its own set of challenges, so having a positive outlook is key to weathering the vicissitudes of history.

15. (C) Asked to gauge the strength of terror groups today, the Sultan agreed with GEN Abizaid that they appear to be weaker, but that it is difficult to know what they may be organizing themselves for in the future. He felt extremist ideology has been discredited by its senseless violence. The Sultan argued that freedom of conscience and speech were the best antidote to extremist ideology, and was encouraged that Arabs appear to be getting over their fear of speaking out and expressing their views. It is time, he said, to let the silent majority speak and exile extremists to the margins of society where they belong. He also thought that couching harsh ideologies in religious cloaks was likewise losing its appeal, in part given the human nature of fearing eternal damnation for violating true religious tenets.

16. (C) That said, the Sultan cautioned against complacency and in favor of sustaining the momentum "in the campaign." "The enemy can sense we are at a crossroads," he noted, and while he is confident that good will prevail over evil, that goal must be fought for, like all worthwhile things. He likened the situation to crawling out of a comfortable, warm bed on a chilly morning: unpleasant, but it must be done. But as long as a nation remains happy, it will prove resistant to extremist influences.

17. (U) USCENTCOM cleared this cable.  
BALTIMORE